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THE KING'S TOUCH FOR SCROFULA

The King's Touch for Scrofula.

BY J. S. BILLINGS, M.D.

For a period of between five and six hundred years, extending from the twelfth to the eighteenth century, there existed in England and France a very general belief in the power of their respective sovereigns to cure the disease known as the scrofula by touching persons affected with it—and hence, apparently, the disease came to be called the king's evil.

The name "Morbus Regius," or Royal disease, was applied to jaundice in the days of Celsus, who entitles the twenty-fourth chapter of his third book "de regio morbo" and says that it has received this name because it should be treated (among other things) "*lecto etiam, et conclavi cultiore, lusu, joco, ludis, lascivia per quæ meus exhilaretur*," while Pliny quotes Varro as saying that it is called the Royal disease because its cure is effected with honied wine. The kings of Hungary were supposed to have the power to cure jaundice, but there are no definite records of their having done so.

We have abundance of data with regard to the ceremony of touching for the evil both in England and France. The chief authority for the English part of the history is the "Charisma Basilicon" of John Browne, the King's Surgeon, published in 1684; and for the

French part the "*de mirabili strumas sanandi vi Solis Galliæ regibus . . . concessa*," by Andre Laurens, chief physician of Henry IV, published in 1609. This last book is in two parts, the first having the title: *De mirabili strumas vi solis Galliæ Regibus christianissimus divinitus concessa*; the other being a book on the nature of struma, its differences, causes, and cures by ordinary means. It contains a folded plate by P. Firens representing the ceremony of touching the scrofulous by the king; some twenty patients have ranged themselves on their knees in a semi-circle formed by the soldiers of the guard, while King Henry IV, in royal costume, has his right hand applied to the forehead of the patient, the head being steadied by the first physician, and the King is pronouncing these words: "*Je te touche et Dieu te guerit.*"

The custom of touching in France is said to have been begun with Clovis, the first Christian king, about 500 A.D. According to the chronicle of Forcadet, Clovis was intimate with, and very friendly to a certain man named Lanicet. Lanicet was affected with scrofula, having enlarged tumefied glands surrounding the neck. He had several times tried different remedies, even to the red-hot iron, and despairing of cure, he hid himself and would not endure the shame of showing his deformity. About this time it came to King Clovis in a dream that he had touched softly the throat of Lanicet, and that suddenly his chamber was filled with a celestial flame, and that in the same place Lanicet became cured so that there was not even any appearance of a scar. The king, with great joy and hope for the life of his friend, arose as soon as it was daylight, and having prayed to God, tried whether he could by

merely touching, do away with the disease, which he did to the great satisfaction of all the attendants. About this time Clovis was anointed and touched with the sacred oil by the Archbishop of Reims; this sacred oil, it was said, was brought from heaven by a dove, and this virtue of curing the scrofula passed from Clovis, the first Christian king, to all his successors who were kings, of whatever race.

There is evidence that Louis le Gros (1108-1137), more than a century before his saintly namesake, touched for the distemper, as vouched by Guilbert of Nogent, who died in 1124.

All the kings of France from Louis IX to Louis XIII made a pilgrimage to Corbeny before they attempted to touch anyone for the malady. It was customary after consecration at the cathedral to go on a pilgrimage to the abbey of Corbeny, where the king was met by the monks bearing the head of St. Marcoul. This they placed in the hands of the king, who carried it to the church and placed it on the high altar. Next day the king touched the scrofulous candidates.

Louis XI (1461-1483) was deprived of the prerogative for his evil living. There is a story told of the king that after he had an attack of apoplexy he sent for St. Francis of Paula, who was very celebrated for his miraculous cures, but who suffered himself from scrofula. They made a bargain that St. Francis should cure the king of his apoplexy and the king should touch St. Francis for the scrofula. But it turned out that neither could the saint cure the king nor the king the saint.

After Louis XIV the pilgrimage to Corbeny was discontinued and the relics of St. Marcoul were brought

to the king from the abbey. The practice was continued in France up to 1775.*

Gabriel Fallope regards as an old woman's story this faculty attributed to the kings of France, but he believes, notwithstanding, that the patients who submitted to the touch were benefited, and some of them even cured, through the fact that they had taken exercise and that their travels were salutary, that they had received one or two crowns to get back to their country, and so on.

Also Guillaume Du Val, doctor of the Faculty of Medicine of Paris, 1640-41, has written a volume defending this famous gift of the kings of France. He also tells us that the consecrated kings of France cured epilepsy in those who would pronounce their names; and that by invoking St. Loup, bishop of Gueret, convulsions in infants were cured. As to Saint Hubert, he not only had the power of curing hydrophobia in those who called upon him, but the patron of hunters had conferred this gift to all his descendants, and he adds, also, that Louis du Quesnay, lord of Varennes, had with his brother and with his sisters the ineffable happiness in having Saint Hubert for their ancestor, and the said Du Quesnay enjoyed the privilege of curing people bitten by mad dogs. How? Simply in initiating them with pious ceremonies, calling upon the great Saint Hubert, and in applying upon their wounds a remedy composed of bread, salt and herbs.†

The author of the chronicle, having settled to his satisfaction that the king really did cure scrofula by

* Brewer, Dictionary of Miracles, Philadelphia, 1884, p. 306.

† G. Du Val, *Historia Monogramma, sive pictura linearis sanctorum medicorum*, Paris, 1643.

touching, discusses whether the effect was (1) by his own royal prerogative, (2) by a special virtue peculiar to the race of kings, (3) by the touchings, (4) by the words which he spoke, (5) by the power of his imagination, or (6) by a power which came to him from God or the devil.

The chronicle dates from 1621, and his conclusion is that it is a gift of God conferred hereditarily to successors.*

The idea that kings have special powers of healing did not originate in the tenth century. Vespasian is said to have restored eyes to the blind and limbs to the lame. His exercise of this wonderful power is related by Suetonius and Tacitus. At first he pretended to slight and ridicule the request of the two poor men, who applied to him for relief, by the command (as they said) of the god Serapis. He continued some time distracted between fear and hope, and referred the case at last to physicians, who, whatever skill they had in their own faculty, appeared to have been accomplished courtiers. The result of their consultation was an advice to Vespasian to try his hand, with an assurance that, be the event what it would, he would receive no disadvantage; if he cured, he would reap all the glory; if he failed, the ridicule would befall the patients.

It is pretended also that the Emperor Adrian cured blindness by the touch. But Spartian, who relates this, confesses at the same time that Marius

* See *De la vertu admirable de guerir les escrouelles, par le seul attouchement, etc.* In *Journal connaissances medicales*, Paris, 1847, vol. xv, page 278. Also *Dict. encyc. des sci. med.* T. xxxii, *Escrouelles*, page 481.

Maximus, an exact and celebrated historian, ascribes all to imposture. *Haec per simulationem facta.*

The traditions are that the first English king who had this power was Edward the Confessor (A.D. 1052), although there is no definite evidence on this point, for it is not mentioned by any writer until about eighty years afterward. Shakespeare uses the tradition in *Macbeth*, where Malcolm, at the Court of Edward the Confessor, speaks :

[MACBETH. Act IV, Scene III.]

Enter a Doctor.

MAL. Well, more anon. Comes the King forth, I pray you?

DOCT. Ay, sir : there are a crew of wretched souls
That stay his cure ; their malady convinces
The great assay of art ; but at his touch,
Such sanctity hath Heaven given his hand,
They presently amend.

MAL. I thank you, doctor.

[Exit doctor.]

MACD. What's the disease he means?

MAL. 'Tis called the "evil";
A most miraculous work in this good king ;
Which often since my here-remain in England,
I have seen him do. How he solicits Heaven,
Himself best knows ; but strangely visited people,
All swoln and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,
The mere despair of surgery, he cures ;
Hanging a golden stamp about their necks,
Put on with holy prayers ; and it is spoken,
To the succeeding royalty he leaves
The healing benediction. With this strange virtue,
He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy ;
And sundry blessings hang about his throne,
That speak him full of grace.

William of Malmsbury, the first chronicler who speaks of the healing power of Edward the Confessor, writes as follows :

"Moreover, I shall now speak of miracles. A young married woman, but childless, was afflicted with

swellings about her neck, and fell into bad health. Being commanded in her sleep to inquire for the bathroom of the king, she entered the palace, when the pious king, dipping his hands into the water and stroking her neck, soon restored her to a happy state of health; the tumours that were filled with worms and corrupt blood bursting and disappearing. But as the sores left wide and disgusting cavities, he ordered her to be supported at the crown's expense till perfectly cured. Before the seventh morning a beautiful new skin appeared, so that no vestiges of the disease could be perceived. A year afterwards she had twins, which added greatly to the sanctity of Edward. It is said by those who knew him intimately, that he frequently cured this complaint in Normandy. Hence in our own days those assert falsely, when they say that the cure of this disease is not to be attributed to godliness, but to an hereditary royalty."*

It was generally acknowledged as a special power of the sovereign in the times of Henry II, whose chaplain about 1180 alludes to it as a well known fact. Queen Elizabeth appears to have for some time discontinued the ceremony; yet she did perform it, and there is a story of a Roman Catholic cured by her who declared that his experience had convinced him that the Pope's excommunication against her had had no effect.

King William refused to touch for the evil, saying: "It is a silly superstition; give the poor creatures

* *Willielmi Malmesburiensis de Gestis Regum Anglorum*, lib. ii., p. 91, edit. Francof. 1601, folio. Copied in Pettigrew, T. J., on superstitions connected with the history and practice of medicine and surgery. Philadelphia, 1844, p. 160.

some money and send them away." On one occasion, however, he was induced to lay his hand on a patient. "God give you better health," he said, "and more sense." Whiston, who tells this story, and who, Macaulay says, believed in everything but the Trinity, says the person was cured (Macaulay's *History of England*, Vol. III, Chap. XIV, 1689).

The last English sovereign who touched for the evil was Queen Anne, and it is said that on the last occasion Dr. Johnson, then a child four or five years old, was touched and received a touch piece.

From *The London Gazette*, No. 4172, Monday, November 5, 1705 :

"It being Her Majesty's Royal Pleasure to Heal Weekly for the Evil during the present and succeeding Month till Christmas, and to begin on Wednesday the 14th Instant, it is her Majesty's Command, That all persons shall be viewed and Tickets delivered the day before, at the Office in Whitehall appointed for that purpose, and no where else ; and that all persons who apply shall bring a Certificate, signed and sealed by the Minister and Churchwardens of the Parish where they inhabit, that they never before received the Royal Touch."

George I discontinued the practice in 1714, but "the office for touching" remained in the prayer-book until 1719, and the Pretender touched the sick in the Paris hospitals, while his son in 1745 touched once in Edinburgh (Chambers' *History of the Rebellion*). The practice of giving a gold or silver coin or medal called a touch-piece was introduced by Edward I.

The Duke of Monmouth, claiming to be the rightful sovereign, was charged, in his trial for high treason,

with having exercised the functions of royalty by touching children for the king's evil.

Pepys, in his diary under date of April 13, 1661, says: "I went to the banquet house and there saw the king (Charles II) heale, the first time that ever I saw him do it, which he did with great gravity, and it seemed to me to be an ugly office, and a simple one."

The number of persons touched was very great, numbering several hundreds a year in the time of Elizabeth, while the records show that over 90,000 were touched by Charles II.

As Dr. Hussey* remarks, "The healing power of the royal touch thus conferred was universally believed, not only by the uneducated or the poor alone, but by the highest in the state and the best and most enlightened of those who lived during this long period; and, among that number, by the physicians and surgeons of the day, many of them possessing acquirements far in advance of the knowledge of their age—men who, as Bishop Douglas observes (*Criterion*, or *Miracles Examined*, ed. 1832, p. 126), 'are not very ready in admitting that cures may be effected without making use of the medicines which they themselves prescribe.'"

Gilbertus Anglicus, a physician who lived about the time of Henry III and Edward I, is one of the earliest medical writers, whose work is known, who alludes to the exercise of the power in words which show the antiquity of the practice. He says scrofula is also called the king's evil, because the kings have the power to cure it. (*Compendium Medicinæ*, lib. iii.)

* E. L. Hussey, "On the Cure of Scrofulous Diseases Attributed to the Royal Touch." *Archæological Journal*, No. 39.

John of Gaddersden, a Fellow of Merton College, physician to Edward II, remarkable as being the first Englishman who was consulted at court as physician, advises recourse to the royal touch in desperate cases, as the kings have the power of curing it (*Rosa Anglica*, lib. ii. c. 1.).

The disease known to English physicians from the twelfth to the eighteenth century as struma, or the king's evil, while not definitely defined, and including some disorders which we should now distinguish from what we call scrofula, did nevertheless probably for the most part consist of cases of enlargement of the glands of the neck, such as are now considered to be due to tubercular adenitis.

The ancient pathology declared that the strumous disease, or king's evil, "is a cold and moist praeternatural intemperiety, generated in the glandules from a subsaline and subacid juice, collated from the wheyish part of the blood, the which, whensoever it enters them, or approach their membranes, it doth both harden, concrete, incrassate and convert the same into a coagulate caseous substance." *

Wiseman says the king's evil is "a tumor arising from a peculiar acidity of the serum of the blood, which, whensoever it lights upon glandule, muscle or membrane, it coagulates and hardens; when it mixeth with marrow always dissolves it and rotteth the bone. If this acid humour be simple, the disease is a simple struma; if joyned with a malignity, or any other humour, it makes a mixt tumour, as *struma*, *maligna*, *phlegmonodes*, *schirroides*, etc."

* Brown, J. *Chaeradologia*, 1684, p. 12.

Clowes, a man of high surgical reputation, surgeon to St. Bartholomew's and Christ's Hospitals, appointed to attend the forces by sea and land in the wars of Queen Elizabeth's time, afterwards sworn Surgeon to the Queen, and subsequently Serjeant-Surgeon to James I, describing the occasional malignity of scrofulous ulcers, says (p. 4) : " These kinds do rather presage a divine and holy curation, which is most admirable to the world, that I have seen and known performed and done by the sacred and blessed hands of the Queen's most Royal Majesty, whose happiness and felicity the Lord long continue." After relating a cure by the Queen's touch, he continues his observations : " And here I do confidently affirm and steadfastly believe that (for the certain cure of this most miserable malady), when all arts and sciences do fail, her Highness is the only day-star, peerless and without comparison "; ending with a prayer " that she may forever reign over us (if it please the Lord God) even unto the end of the world, still to cure and heal many thousands more than ever she hath yet done." (A right fruitful and approved Treatise for the artificial cure of that malady called in Latin Struma, and in English the Evil, cured by Kings and Queens of England, 1602, p. 50).

Fuller says, if any doubt the cures, they are remitted to their own eyes for farther confirmation. (Church History, Vol. I, A.D. 1061-1066).

Wiseman, Chief Surgeon in Charles I's army, and afterwards Serjeant Surgeon to Charles II, whose writings are deservedly held in respect by surgeons at the present day, says : " I myself have been a frequent eye-witness of many hundreds of cures performed by his Majesty's touch alone, without any assistance of

chirurgery ; and those, many of them, such as had tried out the endeavors of able chirurgeons before they came thither. It were endless to recite what I myself have seen, and what I have received acknowledgments of by letter, not only from the several parts of this nation, but also from Ireland, Scotland, Jersey and Garnsey." (Treatises, book iv, c. 1).

Turner, a physician, in 1722, reports the case of a patient of his own, who, after defying his best endeavors at relief, was cured in a few days after being touched by Queen Anne ; and he adds, "I pretend only to make good the assertion that such cures have been wrought." Referring to the large numbers touched since the Restoration, he says : "It may be objected that among a hundred thousand it would be very strange if divers should not afterwards recover. I answer, that if any of those have been attended with such circumstances that the alteration can not fairly be imputed to any other cause, it makes sufficiently for our position ; but instead of one we have many hundreds where the evidence is undeniable." (The Art of Surgery, Vol. I, p. 158).

As late as 1793, J. B. Thiers, author of the History of Superstition, says that these remarkable cures by the kings of France are incontestible in the fact that infants were entirely cured, so that imagination had no part in these remarkable cures.

Some difficult problems arise in connection with the history of the Royal touch for scrofula. Was the whole thing a delusion, or were many cures really affected ? And if there were true cases, how were they brought about ?

And how did it happen that the gift of healing in

this way by the kings of France and England was limited to this disease?

The evidence that some cures were thus effected is as abundant and trustworthy as is that relating to any so-called miraculous cures or that relating to the efficacy of blood-letting, antimony and mercurials in acute febrile diseases as furnished by medical records prior to about 1850. And in saying this I wish to be understood as saying that it is evidence of no value whatever when all the circumstances are taken into consideration. No doubt some of those who were touched became better, or even may be said to have recovered. Wiseman's argument is the strongest one as to the connection of this result with the ceremony. He says: "For since it cannot be denied that many go away cured, some will impute it only to the journey they take and the change of air; others to the effects of imagination; and others to the wearing of gold (Metallotherapy?). The first of these is easily confuted by the hundreds of instances that are to be given of inhabitants of this city, who certainly could meet with little change of air, or indeed of exercise, in a journey to Whitehall. The second is as readily taken off by the examples of infants, who have been frequently healed."

The hypothesis has been advanced that scrofula took the place of leprosy as a disease specially under the control of priestly medicine when leprosy disappeared from Central Europe, and thus came to be the disease which was to bear evidence of the truth of the priestly claims of the kings of France and England. I have not, however, found any evidence that these kings were ever supposed to have any special powers

for the healing of leprosy ; and the choice of struma or scrofula as the special disease to be healed by royal touch appears to have been at first largely a matter of accident. If to-day we were to select a disease to be treated in this manner, we should probably choose certain forms of hysteria and epilepsy such as were in ancient times supposed to be cases of demoniacal possession, and not any form of disease which we supposed to be due to micro-organisms. Yet it is well to bear in mind that, while we should act in accordance with what seems to us to be most probable, we have to deal with probabilities and not with certainties. It is a conceivable hypothesis that the cortical gray centres of perception and idention may so act upon the vaso-motor centres as through them to produce changes in function in glandular and other tissues, and thus to change the composition of albumoses and animal alkaloids contained in the fluids of the body ; and, in fact, we have some evidence that this does sometimes occur. But, if this be possible, it is then also quite possible that by such changes the environment of living tissue may be made either more or less favorable to the development of certain micro-organisms, or that toxic products may be thus either neutralized or increased, with corresponding effects as regards immunity or progress of disease.

Mc Swain